

The Need for Embodiment Perspectives and Somatic Methods in Social Work Curriculum: Lessons Learned from a Decade of Developing a Program to Support College Students Who Exited the State Foster Care System

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Abstract : Social work education is a competency-based curriculum that relies mostly on cognitive frameworks and problem-solving models. Absent from the curriculum is knowledge and skills that draw from an embodiment perspective, especially somatic practice methods. Embodiment broadly encompasses the understanding that biological, political, historical, and social factors impact human development via changes to the nervous system. In the past 20 years, research has well-established that unresolved traumatic events, especially during childhood, negatively impacts long-term health and well-being. Furthermore, traumatic stress compromises cognitive processing and activates reflexive action such as 'fight' or 'flight,' which are the focus of somatic methods. The main objective of this paper is to show how embodiment perspectives and somatic methods can enhance social work practice overall. Using an exploratory approach, the author shares a decade-long journey that involved creating an education-support program for college students who exited the state foster care system. Personal experience, program outcomes and case study narratives revealed that 'classical' social work methods were insufficient to fully address the complex needs of college students who were living with complex traumatic stressors. The paper chronicles select case study scenarios and key program development milestones over a 10-year period to show the benefit of incorporating embodiment perspectives in social work practice. The lessons reveal that there is an immediate need for social work curriculum to include embodiment perspectives so that social workers may be equipped to respond competently to their many clients who live with unresolved trauma.

Keywords : social work practice, social work curriculum, embodiment, traumatic stress

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